

SONS OF THE CITY

A BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS

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## SONS OF THE CITY

*Young Men of the Class of 1909:*

I have, with you, instituted this service because I have wanted for myself the privilege of saying, for myself and for those whom I represent, the last words to you before the day of your going up for your baccalaureate degrees. A voice less familiar than mine would perhaps be more welcome to your ears and would no doubt bring some truth less trite to your minds. But no one else could speak out of a keener sense of what your going means to the College and the City (for I can never dissociate the two) or from a deeper solicitude for your well-being; and so, though my brief part in this service is of my own suggesting, I hope you will give it no other motive than that which you will find somewhere in my devotion to you—you in whom we, who teach and direct here, are to live and move in the great city outside our walls.

Some of those who sit about you this afternoon will think it an extravagant metaphor which speaks of you as the *flower of the hopes of the City*; but it is a figure of deliberate choosing, a figure which was used long ago when one spoke of a certain company of knights as the “Flower of all the Host”—and even they were not such men as you in intellect and armor.

Thousands of young men in this republic are coming up during these weeks for like degrees with you; and if you were to march with them in procession I am not certain that you would be distinguished from them or among them, except that you are a little younger than the average, a little more serious and intent of face, a little more cosmopolitan of type. You would, perhaps, not be differentiated at sight from the men referred to by an eminent university president as having found college “a four years’ playground,” little as you have played except in the sense in which President Lowell defines “play.” You might not be picked out as the survivors of a severe intellectual competition, despite all the rigor of discipline you

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have had to undergo here, nor would you be pointed to as exemplifying the ills of an urban environment.

But there is *one* distinction which you do have, a distinction which gives you an almost unique place among American graduates. You are the baccalaureate sons of a *city*—a city that is in your day doubtless to become the first city in the world, as it is now in the “nobility of its enterprise.” You have an academic genealogy which no other college graduates of 1909 can boast, a genealogy which asks and expects more than any family lineage, however noble, demands of others; for the children born (or reborn) of the spirit of a people are its aristocracy.

Democracy does not champion educating a man, because he is miserable, as an English critic has recently said: “It is because man is so sublime.” “Democracy does not object so much to the ordinary man being a slave, as to his not being a king.” For its dream is always of a “nation of kings.”

And in a very true sense have you been created by this city’s longing for kings. It was said by that ancient philosopher Democritus, who sits first of the group at my right,<sup>1</sup> “Education and nature are similar, for truly education transforms man and, in transforming him, creates in him a new nature.” Fifteen years of teaching by this city have transformed you, have recreated you, have made you her sons, whether you were first born son of an Irish cotter, a Russian gun-maker, an Italian stone-cutter, a Scotch shepherd, a New England farmer, or a New York merchant. Memories of linden trees, of mountains of gold, of fields of grain and roses, of high perched mediæval castles and of the tabernacle in the wilderness are in your names, but in your nostrils is the breath of this city’s desire for her children. You carry in your very being the fire of her hopes, the flame which she has lighted in her search for a good that is beyond the present good.

You are as the sons of Gershon and Kohath and Merari in that ancient theocracy from whose teaching we have imported so much into the form and spirit of our government and civilization—they who were appointed of their very birth to

<sup>1</sup> The reference is to the painting in the Great Hall of the College.

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minister, when they came of age, in the most sacred things to that wandering people seeking an abiding city; they who were nurtured to their task of carrying, keeping and protecting the holy place in the midst of their migrant city, and afterward their temple, of "setting forward its work," of serving as officers and judges, of prophesying with instruments of music, but above all of guarding the fire which was the only visible intimation that they were not a hopelessly nomad people, migrants who would never find their way out of the desert, left to wander they knew not whither.

And the fire, the same fire that appeared as the Shekinah in that tabernacle cared for by the sons of Gershon, Kohath and Merari, is the fire that gives glow to the painting that is before you—the painting in which you are yourselves represented as the central figure; only you are not merely to help guard its source, but to carry it forth, as the fire-bringers, the bearers of light.

Is this only the fancy of the artist, a conceited rhapsody of my own interest in you, a magnifying of the office of this College? Is it after all more than an antiquated vessel of unpractical light that you carry at best, out of the past, down this hillside into a modern city in whose electric blaze your flame is as a shadow, in whose gusts of passion and avarice it may soon be blown out; or if it last, will but cook your food and give you light till you can come into the circuit of the industrial dynamo or other lighting systems, when you will throw it away as something for which you have no use, an academic, sentimental ideal?

Would they have you pictured as a vocational graduate, defining you, after the fashion of Carlyle, "as the animal who makes tools"? Then the central figure might as well be an ingenious beaver or an industrious ant. Would they represent you as holding forth a lever, a spring, an inclined plane or some other mechanical symbol? Then would I remind them, as I have myself been recently reminded by a scientist, that, wonderful and admirable as the progress in the invention and use of mechanical devices has been in the last few centuries, the commonest plants and flowers had perfected them under

the same Teacher, when man had not yet entered the kindergarten of this school of the universe. The common sage had devised a lever and the maple tree a screw and the Spanish broom a spring with which to throw out its golden pollen, ages and ages before Archimedes appeared with his formula of the parabola and all that. Would they give you the wings of an aeroplane as intimating the latest achievement in mechanics? I am reminded that the common dandelion has built a flying machine more rigid, light, subtle and safe than any that the human brain will invent or human hands construct. And I have noticed that the medal struck in honor of the Wrights places a torch in the hand of the "graduate of the air."

So great is my admiration for the workmanship of man, so ennobling do I consider its place in human life, that I should have been willing to put a hammer, a brush, a chisel in one hand of the graduate; but I should have put the lamp in the other: the hammer, the brush or the chisel as the symbol of what I wish every one could have of the senses' training, somewhere, somehow; and the torch, the lamp, as the symbol of that peering of the intellect and the soul of man past the senses into the life that is more than meat and raiment and shelter.

I agree with Professor Loeb, as I have seen him quoted, that the instinct of workmanship would be the greatest source of happiness to the race if it were not for the fact that our present social and economic organization allows only a few to satisfy that instinct. They were happy days when I ploughed the fields and unstrapped my Horace from the beam to read at the end of the furrow. They were happy days when in a printer's shop I set the type in the afternoon of the translation which I had read in my college class in the morning of *Prometheus Bound* (that wonderful story of the first fire-bringer, whose successors you are). And they would be happier days for all of us, I believe, if we could all have some trade for our hands, some employment that would enable us to have some satisfaction in our handiwork, as the Almighty has in his.

The saddest picture I ever saw is of Eve in her haggard age, on a journey with Cain, standing on a knoll and pointing with her bony fingers off toward the horizon: "See yonder, Cain,"

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she might have been saying, "that grove of trees! That was Paradise." .But we cannot go back there, whatever that was. (And it would be our sensuous animal selves that we should go back to, no doubt, if we did.) It would be idle, it would be cowardly to wish to go back. The way lies in another direction, by a hard road—where the aspiration of the City sends this young man with his torch. Just where it leads, no one can certainly tell, but we do know that it is never to be followed except by absolute intellectual honesty, utter unselfishness, keenest spiritual vision and a supreme courage. It is the road of which Job spoke when he said there is a "path which the vulture's eye hath not seen." It is the road of approach to the Next Kingdom, and it is not of the finding of mechanical skill alone, nor of microscopic or telescopic observation.

In a fascinating essay on the *Intelligence of the Flowers*, Maeterlinck tells how the flower exerts itself with one sole aim; "to escape above from the fatality below, to evade, transgress the heavy sombre law, to set itself free, to shatter the narrow sphere, to invent or invoke wings, to escape as far as it can, to conquer the space in which destiny encloses it, to approach another kingdom."

To approach, to enter, another kingdom, has that not been the struggle of the millions of years back of us? And is that struggle to stop in us, in our little stretch of time? Is this the end, except as we, like the orchids in the vegetable kingdom, become more bold and intelligent in our physical inventions? Are we to the savage only as the orchid to the grass?

I would not be standing here if I thought so. I doubt if Galileo<sup>1</sup> would take his eyes from the heavens or lift them from his globe to look at you if the city were training you merely to get your living more easily and cleverly, or even to help you to make others' bodies a little more comfortable and lengthen their lives. What would the great discovery of Harvey, who sits looking meditatively at you, amount to, if your blood in its circulation did not warm to something higher than getting ahead of some other man in a business or professional transaction; and blind Beethoven and aged Michael Angelo, would

<sup>1</sup> Again reference is made to the figures in the painting.

they have the slightest interest in you if your torch were flameless?

I am not saying that we do not need every practical endeavor for physical betterment; all I am contending is that this sort of aspiration does not carry us to the boundaries of the kingdom, or if it does, there is another kingdom beyond, though we may be as little able to tell of it as the plant, which is just climbing over the ridge between the vegetable and the animal, is to describe the creature we call man, with the soul of a god, which secretly it longed to be.

A professor of natural history from Aberdeen, of whom I inquired concerning this kingdom which we call ours, said that we have only begun to enter upon it. The world is not static, the struggle is not ended. There is need of your flame down there in the darkened streets, not of your skill alone, not of your knowledge alone, but of your living true to the hopes of which the City has begotten you.

I can but recall to you again that sentence of John Morley's, which I quoted to you on the night when you lighted your numeral lamps,—that sentence in which at the end of the three volumes of his *Life of Gladstone*, and after summing up the achievements of Mr. Gladstone's statesmanship, he said, "Besides all this he upheld a golden lamp." This sentence, which was an epitaph to that noble life begun just a century ago, is, when put into the future tense, the best wish that I can give you. "Besides all this you will uphold a golden lamp," though it will not matter if the vessel be of clay or pewter or brass, instead of gold, and it will matter little what its fashion is, if only it carry the light with which the City has touched your existence.

It is a custom in certain lands, I have somewhere read, to prepare the candles for particular ceremonies with the most anxious care. The bees which distil the wax are sacred. They range in gardens for their use alone. The wax is gathered by consecrated hands and the shaping of the candles is performed to the sound of music and in holy places—all because these candles are to burn in lofty ceremonies. With these illustrious men of the ages sitting above you, following

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you with their concern, waiting to see what you will do with your fire, life should be for you a continuous lofty ceremony and all days sacred days. This does not mean that you are to go solemnly, priggishly, conceitedly down with a holier-than-thou attitude, as men too good to do the humblest, hardest, honest task, because you have heard great truths of the race; but that you go with the modesty of a true scholar, yet with the consciousness of the high office and function into which you have been born. You are not charity wards of the city, or the state or nation, as Descartes was not, as Grant and Farragut were not, as Remsen and MacMaster and Shepard and Goethals were not, as the thousand sons and daughters of the magnificent state universities in the West and South are not. You are, I repeat, the City's sons, the sons of her free spirit.

More than any other young men among her thousands are you to toil for her, are you to sacrifice for her, are you to defend her against her enemies, are you to carry forward her work, her ideals. Men will come to this city from other colleges, men who were not born here, men who have been trained in private institutions or by other communities, or men who have had no such training; but on none of these rests the same obligation as upon you, not because of the tuition or the books that have been given you (many men who have broken her laws and have been sent to prison have had more spent on them than was spent on you), but because you have known her affection, because you have learned her dearest wishes, because you have studied her purposes.

Opening one day a rare volume of Spenser's "Faerie Queene," I glanced at the frontispiece which represented a knight in full armor riding out on a journey or to battle. At the roadside was an aged man who had just been giving him God-speed and the legend ran as I first hastily read it:

"Right well ye have advised been  
The way to win is rightly to advertise."

I was surprised to hear this mediæval sage giving such advice, but in a moment I saw that I had misread. It was written

"Right well ye have advised been  
The way to win is rightly to advise."

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And you are to win as the old seer said and not as a modern seer might try to persuade you. You are to win by rightly advising those into the midst of whom you go. You are not to hold your light so that you may be seen advertised; you are to hold it that others may find their way, that they may be advised, that the verges of light may be extended and that you, yourselves, may not stumble.

As you have been told in your course in pedagogy, and as you probably have in fresher memory than I, the Athenian youth approximately of your age, when leaving what might with propriety be called the City College of Athens, took an oath, calling the gods to witness their sincerity, that they would never disgrace the sacred arms, nor desert their companions, that they would fight for the temples and public property, both alone and with many, that they would transmit their fatherland not only not less, but greater and better, than they found it, that they would obey the magistrates and observe the laws.

An even higher pledge is asked of you. And I could wish that when you go out, a few days from now, with your diplomas and your fire, you may make oath to yourselves in the presence of all these illustrious witnesses from the past and of those out of the present, that you will bring no disgrace to the City by dishonesty, by cowardice, by meanness, that you will not desert the companions of your home and neighborhood who need your help now more than ever, that you will fight for the sacred things of the City, that you will carry no false light to the people, and that you will transmit this City, not only not less, but greater, better, more beautiful than it was transmitted to you.